

Mahmood-ul-Hasan *

DEPICTION OF ASOKA RAJA IN THE BUDDHIST ART OF GANDHARA

Abstract

Asoka was the grandson of the Chndragupta Maurya, founder of one of the greatest empires of the ancient India (321-297 BC). The empire won by Chandragupta had passed to his son Bindusara, after his death, it was again transmitted to his son Asoka. During early years of his kingship he was a very harsh ruler. But after witnessing the miseries and suffering of people during the Kalinga War (260 BCE.) Ashoka converted to Buddhism and decided to substitute the reign of the peace and tranquility for that of violence. Due to his acts of piety and love for the Buddhist faith he become the most popular and personality after Buddha for the Buddhists. Many legends associated with him i.e. "a handful dust", "redistribution of Relics", "his visit of underwater stupa at Ramagrama" are depicted in Gandhara Art. In the present article an effort has been made to identify and analyze the legends of Ashoka in the light of their historical background.

Keywords: Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara, Ashoka, Kalanga war, Buddhism.

Introduction

The Buddhist Art of Gandhara came in to being in the last century before the Christian era, when the Sakas were ruling in the North-West (Marshall, 1973:17) and further developed during the Parthian period (1st century A.D.). Like the Sakas, the Parthians were confirmed philhellenes and proud of their Hellenistic culture, and not only had they large numbers of Greek subjects in their empire but they were in a position to maintain close commercial contacts with the Mediterranean coasts (Ibid: 6). Due to such contacts of the Parthians with the Greek World, influence of the Greek art the Buddhist Art of Gandhara was inevitable. On the other hand, indigenes Buddhist art of India, which has already developed in Gangetic plans also, had strong influence on the local sculptors of Gandhara. Amalgamation of foreign and local elements resulted in emergence of a beautifully blended religious art, which reached to its climax in 2nd to 3rd century A.D. during the hey days of the great Kushans.

Sir John Marshall while describing the emergence of the Buddhist Art of Gandhara states that "the purpose of these sculptures was to glorify the Buddha. This they did by recounting episodes from the story of his life and of his previous births, or some times, but only rarely, from the subsequent history of the Buddhist

* Mahmood-ul-Hasan Assistant Director, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad.

church” (Ibid:7). Representation of the subsequent events of the history of Buddhism, mainly associated with the monarchs, nobles and saints who rendered admirable services for expansion and promotion of the *dharma* by their righteous deeds. After Buddha the most favorite and popular personality in Buddhism was the Asoka the Great, whose legends and acts of piety were frequently represented in the Buddhist Art of the greater Gandhara.

Coronation of Asoka:

The greatest political and spiritual figure of ancient India, Asoka Devanampriya Priyadarsin Raja Magadhe: "Asoka, the beloved of the gods, of amiable expression, king of Magadha" (Lamotte, 1988: 223) was the grandson of the Chndragupta Maurya founder of one of the greatest empire of the ancient India (321-297 BC). The empire won by Chandragupta had passed intact to his son Bindusara, and when, after the lapse of a quarter of a century, the scepter was again transmitted from the hands of Bindusara to those of his son Asoka (Smith,1909: 20). But this transmission of power was not so easy, according to *Asokavadana*, in fact the Mauryan king Bindusara had two sons, Asoka and Vitasoka by a brahmin girl from Campala; the first was' to fulfill the Buddha's prediction. At the time of his birth, the Seer Pingalavatsa asserted that he would succeed his father, to the detriment of the crown prince Susima, in his youth, Asoka was sent by Bindusara to Takasasila and Khasa to quell the revolts which had been provoked by the governors' extortions. He accomplished that mission so skillfully that, on the death of Bindusara, the ministers made him mount the throne of Magadha; however, since Susima claimed his right to the crown, Asoka shut himself up in Pataliputra and set guards before the doors. Susima, while attempting to enter the town, fell into a cleverly hidden brazier and perished in it. Now in power, Asoka named Radhagupta as his prime minister. He picked a quarrel with his counsellors and his women folk and had five hundred ministers and five hundred concubines put to death. These executions earned him the name of "Asoka the Cruel" (Candasoka) (Lamotte, 1988: 239).

Conversion of Asoka:

On the advice of Radhagupta, he built a prison modelled on the Buddhist hells and entrusted the guardianship of it to the cruel Girika, with the order to put to death all those who entered it. The holy monk Samudra entered it inadvertently and was tortured by Girika; but as he had attained Arhatship, the torment did not affect him. Asoka came to see this wonder for himself, and the holy one reproached him for his cruelty and revealed the Buddha's prediction according to which Asoka was to become a holy king of the Law. Seized with remorse, Asoka embraced Buddhism and took the upasaka vows. He had the executioner Girika burned alive and the prison razed.

According to other traditions, Asoka converted to Buddhism after witnessing the miseries and suffering of people during the Kalinga War (260 BC). Kalinga inscription narrates that: During the conquest of Kalinga, 150,000 persons were deported, 100,000 were killed; several times that number perished. This catastrophe severely affected all the inhabitants, brahmins and sramanas, as well as the 'believers and devout citizens. Smitten with remorse, the king decided to substitute the reign of the Dharma for that of violence (Lamotte, 1988: 226).

Religion of Asoka:

Reign of terror was over and a realm of peace and tranquility prevailed. Henceforth, Candāsoka became Devanampriya Priyadarsin, the beloved of the gods, of amiable expression. Eleventh major Rock Inscription explains dharma of Asoka in detail: “Thus speaks the beloved of the gods, the King Piyadassi: There is no gift comparable to the gift of *dharmā*, the praise of *dharmā*, the sharing of *dharmā*, fellowship in *dharmā*. And this is: good behavior towards slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, generosity towards friends, acquaintances and relatives, and towards *sramanas* and Brahmans, and abstention from killing living beings. Father, son, brother, master, friend, acquaintance, relative, and neighbor should say, ‘this is good, this we should do.’ By doing so, there is gain in this world, and in the next, there is infinite merit, through the gift of *dharmā* (Keay John, 2000:94).

Depiction of Asoka’s Legends in the Gandhara Art

Asoka being a zealous, conscientious ruler, preoccupied with the present and future happiness of his subjects and neighbours, undertook many noble actions for propagation of *dharmā*. *Asokavadana* compiled by Majjhantika, the Buddhist missionary sent by Asoka to Gandhara for propagation of *dharmā* and Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsung gives detail of the legends associated with Asoka and his acts of piety, which were among the most favorite subjects for sculptors of Gandhara and frequently represented in the relief panels of the Gandhara Art:

Offering of the Handful of Dust:

The most popular legend in Gandhara Art was the gift of earth offered by Asoka to Buddha in his previous birth. “It was a daily custom of the Buddha, who enjoined the same upon his monks, to wander abroad at a certain hour in quest of food, as the whole Order were dependent for their sustenance upon the voluntary offerings of the pious” (Hargreaves, 1930: 37, 38). Once arriving from the Kalandakavana, the Buddha enters Rajagrha in order to beg for his food. His entry into the town is marked by several wonders. Two little boys, Jaya and Vijaya, are playing in the road and amusing themselves with making houses and granaries out of earth. On seeing the Buddha, Jaya respectfully offers him a handful of earth; Vijaya, his hands joined, approves his companion’s action. The Buddha predicts to Ananda that, one hundred years after his Nirvana, young Jaya will be the holy king Asoka, who will reign in Pataliputra over the whole of India and will build 84,000 stupas; Vijaya will be his minister, with the name of Radhagupta.



Fig.1 Acceptance of the children's offer-Chatpat (Period II)

Fig.1: The most faithful depiction of the scene ever came from Gandhara Art is a stupa drum panel in blue schist, measuring 16 inches by 5.8 inches bearing Reg. No. 127 recovered from Chatpat (Dani, 1969: 85, pl.46 a, No.88). . An incased Persopolitan pillar surmounted by two winged horses separates the long panel. The scene proper is a vivid representation of offering handful of dust made by two little children Jaya and Vajaya to the Buddha. Buddha is standing frontally with alms bowl held in his left hand, and holding robe in the right. On the left side of the Buddha, two nude children are standing under a tree. One child is pouring dust in the bowl while the second is holding his hands up in the same gesture. The Buddha is receiving the offering with a sense of blessed satisfaction. On the right side of the Buddha is Vajrapani in the pose of walking. He is putting on typical Indian dress. Next stands Ananda with a begging bowl in left hand. In this panel, the sculptor represented the legend with utmost perfection. Moving figure of Vijrapani, expressions of Buddha, gazing style of Ananda and above all naturalistic and spontaneous actions of the nude children make the scene lively and show command and creativity of the sculptor.



Fig.2 Offering of the handful dust-Chatpat(PeriodII)

Fig.2: A stupa drum panel in blue schist stone measuring 14.3x6 inches bearing Reg. No.204 is also came from Chatpat (Dani, 1969: 84, pl.45a.No.86). The panel depicts two scenes separated by a Corinthian pilaster with Buddha seated in *dhyanamudra* on a full blown lotus. The right-hand scene depicts the acceptance by the Buddha of an offering. Here the Buddha is standing turned to his left and facing the two naked children who are making the offering. The Buddha, who is putting on the typical Gandharan robe covering both shoulders and having a large halo behind his head, is receiving the offer in a bowl from two nude children who are standing probably beside their mother with clasped hands. The mother is fully robed and has an ornamental headgear. The child in front, who is actually in the act of offering, has bent his knees while the second is standing erect with clasped hands. The hairstyle of two children is different. On right side of the Buddha is standing young Vijrapani, clad in western dress. His body is slightly turned on his left and he is looking towards the children. Another figure, probably a lay worshipper is present behind the Vijrapani.



Fig-3 OFFERING OF HANDFUL OF DUST, NIMOGRAM, SWAT MUSEUM

Fig.3: Green Schist panel measuring 8.25 x 13.50 x 3 inches, Ref. No.NG454 recovered from Nimogram, now in the collection of Swat Museum. The panel framed on the left by a Corinthian pilaster the shaft of which is carved on the front and side with a haloed standing figure. The figure on the front of the pilaster holds a flower in his left hand. The panel is bordered on the bottom by a plain fillet while the top is broken. However, the top of the side of the panel has a slight projecting cornice at the top with a saw-tooth pattern below. The haloed figure of the Buddha is at the center of the composition, holding his right hand in *abhayamudrā* and alms bowl in his left. A princely figure standing before him seems to be pouring an offering into his bowl. Two other youthful looking figures are behind, one (Jaya) standing and holding up an offering (dust) and the other (Vijaya) seated on the ground with the fingers of one hand held up in *chinmudra*.

Both children are clad in loin-cloth. The torso of a standing female is at the right side of the panel. A tree mostly damaged stands behind these figures. Standing behind the Buddha is a bearded Vajrapani, holding vajra in his left hand while right rests on his hip. His body slightly turned to left and he is watching the children keenly. Two figures are standing on the right side of the Buddha behind the Vajrapani. The figure near the right shoulder of the Buddha is Ananda clad in monastic robe. In this panel, the sculptor incorporated a princely figure before the child (Jaya) to give the idea that the innocent child is just imitating the elder.



Fig.4. Offering of handful dust (Peshawar Museum)

Fig.4: A relief panel recovered from Sahri Bahlol in 1911-12 bearing Acc. No.1708110 is now in the collection of the Peshawar Museum (Ingholt 1957:80-81, No.110). The panel depicts the scene of the offering of the handful of dust. On the left side, the panel is framed by acanthus leaf and a fillet runs on the top. The panel is damaged from right and lower side. In the remaining preserved portion of the panel, the Buddha is standing on the extreme right with alms bowl in his right hand, small nude boy (Jaya) is pouring fistful of dust in his bowl. The Buddha is looking the boy with love. A group of worshipping princes stand behind on the right side of the Buddha with clasped hands.



Fig.5 OFFERING OF THE HANDFUL OF DUST (Swat Museum)

Fig.5: A trapezoidal panel from Swat Museum bearing No.V-1219 represents the same legend. The panel is framed on both sides with a fillet with incised lotus petals. Top of the panel is decorated with acanthus leaves. The panel is divided in two registers by a fillet decorated with bead and reel patterns. Upper register is further divided in two panels by Corinthian pilasters. Each panel contains figure of Buddha in *dhyanamudra*. In the lower register, legend of the offering of the handful of dust has been depicted. Buddha holds his alms bowl in his left hand, his right hand is raised in *abhayamudra*. A youth (Jaya) standing in front of the Buddha has long hair and chignon on the top; he is clad in long *kurta* with full sleeves. His left knee is slightly bent and pouring dust in the bowl of Buddha with his both hands. Jaya is followed by his friend Vajay, who is stark naked and holds both hands up as a gesture of offering. A female behind the child is probably his mother. A male figure behind the female is watching the scene interestingly. A tree behind the figures creates the atmosphere of village street. On the left side of the Buddha is Vajrapani with a proportionally long vijra holding in

both hands which is unusual. Behind the *Vajrapani* is Ananda dressed in monastic robe. He holds bowl in left hand and watching the scene.

Asoka's Collection of the Relics of Buddha:

According to at least some versions of the Asoka legend, Asoka decided to erect a large number of monuments commemorating the glory of the Buddha. He sets out to gather all the Buddha relics, from the Drona stupa built by Ajatasatru in Magadha and from the six Drona stupas, those at Vaisali, Kapilavastu, Pava, Calakalpa, Visnudvipa and Kusinagari. Asoka's decision resulted in unrest among the chieftains of above-mentioned states. They were not in agreement with the Asoka's decision to withdraw the sacred relics of the blessed one, which they inherited, from their ancestors. Keeping in view the expected resistance by the chieftains Asoka started his campaign of collecting the relics of Buddha with his great army. Mala Chiefs were not able to face power of Asoka therefore, all seven chiefs of the concerned tribes appeared before Asoka and agreed to surrender their share of relics.



Fig.6 Submission of Mala Chiefs before Asoka (Charg Patai)

Fig.6: The episode of the submission of the seven chieftains is represented in a panel recovered from Charg Pate, Dir now in the collection of the Peshawar University Museum, Inv. No..CGP-1981-1-66(CGP 1). Oblong panel framed on left side with an encased Corinthian pilaster, a plain fillet runs on the bottom. The panel shows two scenes; in the foreground is the scene of the submission of seven chieftains of Kusinagari, Vaisali, Kapilavastu, Pava, Calakalapa and Ramagrama before Asoka Raja. The King Asoka is sitting crossed legs on a throne under a parasol. Head of the king is missing; left hand rests on the knee while with right hand the king is touching his necklace. A figure on the back of the throne is holding a flywhisk. In front of the king is a kneeling princely figure/noble in *anjalinudra* (a gesture of veneration or subjugation). Behind the kneeling figure are two princely figures with elaborate turbans, wearing earrings, heavy necklaces of beads and clad in princely attire; right hands of both figures are raised up to their chest, heads are slightly bowed to express respect. In the second

row are three princely figures, from right side first two figures are standing in the same manner as preceding figures, while the third is in *anjali mudra*, behind this is the seventh princely figure. In the background are armed soldiers riding on camel and war Elephant. The soldiers are wearing turbans forming three strands around the head, while, end of the turbans is fastened beneath the chins. A figure with similar turban is standing in front of the elephant.

Visit of Asoka Raja to the Underwater Stupa of Nagas at Ramagrama:

According to the Asoka legend, after gathering all the Buddha relics from the Drona stupa built by Ajatasatru in Magadha and the next six Drona stupas those at Vaisali, Kapilavastu, Pava, Calakalpa, Visnudvipa and Kusinagari he comes to the last Drona stupa, at Ramagrama, he finds that it is now underwater in the palace of the nagas. This in itself does not stop the great Mauryan monarch. He asks the naga king to take him down to his abode to show him the relics but once there, Asoka realizes that the nagas are worshiping the relics in a much more fervent and grandiose way than he could ever hope to emulate, and so he decides to let them keep their relics. Accordingly, he returns to his capital with sarira from only seven of the eight Drona stupas. The king did not take the relics from there, but left them alone and, full of faith, withdrew” (Lamotte 1988, p.241,242).

The Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, seeks to give a naturalistic explanation to this situation. It claims that the Drona stupa, originally built on the shores of the Ganges at Ramagrama was carried away in a flood, as a result of which the urn containing the relics sank to the bottom of the ocean, where it was recovered and kept by the nagas. However, in this text, when Asoka tries to get the relics from the nagas, he refrains from doing so not because the nagas are doing a fine job taking care of the relics but because some ascetic arhats tell him that those relics are, in fact, destined for later enshrinement in Sri Lanka by the future king Dutthagamani (Geiger Wilhelm,1912: 247).



Fig.7 ASOKA'S VISIT TO UNDERWATER NAGA'S STUPA (Charg Patai)

Fig.7: A relief panel recovered from Charg Pati bearing Inv.No.CGP-1981-1-67(CGP 2). Now in the collection of the University Museum, Peshawar depicts scene of the visit of Asoka Raja to the underwater stupa of Ramagrama. In the middle of the panel is a stupa constructed on a square base, base has low molding on the base and top. Drum of the stupa is plain having molding around the upper edge. Above molding a balustrade is running all around the dome which recalls the balustrade of the great stupa of Sanchi. Dom of the stupa is decorated with wavy lines and eglantines within squares. *Harmica* and two umbrellas above the dome are damaged. Two high pillars surmounted by lion figures are seen on either side of the stupa. On the right side of the stupa, Asoka Raja is sitting crossed legs on a throne; a footrest is placed under his feet. Face of the king is badly chipped off; left hand rests on thigh, while with right hand the king is pointing towards the stupa. On the left side of the stupa is a female sitting on a stool with clasped hands in the pose of veneration. A female donor is standing in front of the sitting female with offering in her hands. The sitting woman is keenly looking the offering. In the background, on the either side of the stupa two nagas are shown worshipping the stupa. Faces and hoods of both nagas are chipped off but traces of hoods behind the head are clearly visible.



Fig.8 ASOKA'S VISIT TO UNDERWATER STUPA OF NAGAS (Shaikhan Dheri)

Fig.8: Another example of the same legend was unearthed from Sheikhan Dheri. A small arched panel in grey schist measuring 30 x 29 x 4 cm bearing inventory No.PM-2840(old:203) depicts a stupa with square base having incised flowers decoration, a staircase provides approach to the *pradakshinapatha* around the drum. Two serpents are shown wrapped around the drum, with their

hoods up in the air. Dom of the stupa is decorated with inverted lotus petals and surmounted by harmica and three *chatras* (parasols). On the left side of the panel is shown Asoka Raja gazing the serpents with wonder. Behind the king is another male figure in *anjanimudra*. On the right side of the stupa are two figures in *anjanimudra*, the figure in foreground is a shaven headed Buddhist monk.

Conclusion:

The greatest political and spiritual figure of ancient India, Asoka known to the history as: "Asoka, the beloved of the gods, of amiable expression, king of Magadha" (Lamotte, 1988: 223). Asoka is remembered in the history for services he rendered for the welfare of his subjects. His acts of piety and zealous efforts for promotion of Buddhism in the sub-continent and adjoining countries, his reforms in *dharma and sangha*. In Buddhist legend, Asoka was seen as a relic venerator. His most famous legendary deed was his redistribution of the Buddha relics from the Drona reliquaries into 84,000 stupas. The Yaksas who were under his orders were dispersed all over Jambudvīpa and built 84,000 stupas in which the caskets were placed. The Sthavira Yasas, abbot of the Kukkutarama, gave the signal to start work by hiding the sun with his hand, and all the stupas were completed at the same time. Their construction earned Asoka the "King of the right Law" (Lamotte 1988, p.240). As a result, for generations, Buddhist pilgrims, coming across ancient stupas, have thought of them as "Asokan stupas," (Strong, 1948: 124). After Buddha the most favorite and venerable personality for the Buddhist of Gandhara was Asoka, under whom patronage the *dharma* of peace was reached to them. The sculptors of Gandhara immortalized the noble acts of Asoka by portraying them in the Buddhist Art of Gandhara.

Bibliography

- Ashvagoshā: 1883, As trans., *Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King, a life of Buddha*, Oxford.
- Beal, Samuel: 1884 *Buddhist Record of the Western World*, vol.I, II, London.
- Dani, A.H.: 1969, Excavation at Chatpat, *Ancient Pakistan vol.IV*, Peshawar.
- Exhibition Catalogue:2008, *Gandhara the Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan*, Art and Exhibition Hall, Bonn.
- Exhibition Catalogue: 2010, *Pakistan a Land of Encounters 1st-6th Centuries, the Arts of Gandhara*, Paris.
- Exhibition Catalogue: 2011, *The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan Art of Gandhara*, New York.
- Foucher, A.:1914, *The Beginning of the Buddhist Art*, London.
- Geiger Wilhelm:1912, *Mahāvamsa or the great Chronicle of Ceylon*, Oxford.
- Grunwedel: 1901, trans. Gibson, Agnes.C., *The Buddhist Art in India*, London.
- Hargreaves, H.:1930, *Handbook to the Sculptures in Peshawar Museum*, Calcutta.
- Ingholt Harald:1957, *Gandhara Art in Pakistan*, New York.
- Keay John:2000, *India A History*, New York.
- Lamotte:1988, *History of Indian Buddhism*, Louvain.
- Macphail M. James:1922, *Asoka*, Calcutta.
- Marshall: 1973, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara* 2nd Edition, Department of Archaeology and Museums.
- McCrimdell, J.W.:1877, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, Calcutta.
- Paul Suwarcha:1986, *Catalogue of Gandhara Sculptures in Chandigarh Museum*, Chandigarh.
- Rapson E.J.:1922, *Cambridge History of India*, Vol.I, Cambridge.
- Sehrai Fidaullah:1991, *The Buddha Storey in the Peshawar Museum*, Peshawar.
- Smith, A. Vincent: 1901, *Asoka the Buddhist Emperor of India*: Oxford.
- Strong. S. John 1948, *Relics of the Buddha*, Oxford.
- Thapar, R.:1961, *Asoka and the decline of the Maurya*, OUP, Oxford.